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Arizona Corporation Commission

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IN THE MATTER OF THE APPLICATION OF UTILITY SOURCE, LLC, AN ARIZONA CORPORATION, FOR A DETERMINATION OF THE FAIR VALUE OF ITS UTILITY PLANTS AND PROPERTY AND FOR INCREASES IN ITS WATER AND WASTEWATER RATES AND CHARGES FOR UTILITY SERVICE BASED THEREON.

Docket No. WS-04235A-13-0331

RUCO'S CLOSING BRIEF

The Residential Utility Consumer Office ("RUCO") hereby files its Closing Brief in the matter of Utility Source, L.L.C. ("Utility Source," or "Company") application for a revenue increase totaling \$207,335 for its water division and \$198,773 for its wastewater division. Company Final Schedules – Schedule C-1.¹

1) <u>INTRODUCTION</u>

Utility Source is a small water company that is making a relatively large request of its customers in this case. Utility Source's revenue increase for its water division is approximately 100.56 percent over test year revenues and for its wastewater division approximately 166.39

¹ For ease of reference, all exhibits will be identified by exhibit number and all transcript references will be identified by page number in the transcript. Company Final Schedule A-1.

percent over test year revenues. Company Final Schedules. For the most part there are not a lot of disputed issues in this case. The Company is not proposing a SIB nor does the Company appear to be over-reaching in the number of adjustors and surcharge mechanisms it is requesting – a refreshing change from the norm. The following are the issues that remain in dispute, a discussion of those issues and RUCO's recommendations.

2) RATEBASE

Contributions in Aid of Construction ("CIAC")

RUCO agrees with Intervener Erik Nielsen and believes it is appropriate to reclassify certain plant as CIAC which RUCO believes was never included by the Company in prior cases. Nielsen-3 at 15-17. RUCO has imputed \$109,206 related to mains that should have been classified as distribution pipe for the wastewater division. RUCO has imputed \$34,500 related to fire hydrants which should have been classified as CIAC, and \$73,252 related to mains that should have been classified as distribution pipe for the water division. Nielsen-3 at 15-17.

Hook-up fees

The Commission, in the Company's CC&N application², rejected the Company's request to recover hook-up fees. RUCO-1. Nonetheless, in the hearing it was shown that at least in one instance, the Company collected a hook-up fee. See RUCO-2. The Company claims that it has not collected any others, at least that the owner knows of, but prior to seeing the exhibit the Company was under the assumption that it could not collect any hook-up fees. Transcript at 89-90.

² Decision No. 67446 at paragraph #16.

RUCO has no reason to agree or disagree with the Company. RUCO believes that under the circumstances, it would be appropriate to impute a portion of the hook-up fees that the Company had projected it would recover during the CC&N case. RUCO has imputed hook-up fees of \$201,000 (i.e. \$1,000 fee x 201 lots) for the water division, and \$361,800 (i.e. \$1,800 x 201 lots) for the wastewater division. The basis for RUCO's recommendation is the direct testimony of Mr. Erik Nielsen. Nielsen-2 at 10.

Plant - Shallow Wells 1, 3, 4 and 5.

There is no question that shallow wells 1, 3, 4 and 5 are inactive and not used and useful. S-1, Exhibit MT-1, at 2. The Company accounted for shallow wells 1, 2, and 3 under a single journal entry in the amount of \$138,000. RUCO has removed wells 1 and 3, 2/3 of this amount or \$92,000, and the associated depreciation of \$15,318 for the water division. The reason why RUCO did not remove shallow well's 4 and 5 is because they were not included in rate base, thus there was no adjustment to make. RUCO Final Schedule JMM-7 for the water division.

3) OPERATION EXPENSES

APS Power Bills

RUCO has removed \$4,950 in APS power bills that relate to deep well number four which is not used and useful for the water division. RUCO Final Schedules JMM-17 for the water division.

SRP Electric Bills

RUCO has removed \$12,040 which has been split evenly (i.e. \$6,020) between the water and wastewater division for SRP electric costs that are not related to the day to day operations of the utility and only benefit the owner Lonnie McCleve. RUCO Final Schedules

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JMM-17 for both the water and wastewater divisions. RUCO does not believe that paying the utility bills of the Company's owner is appropriate now nor is it appropriate in the future.

APS Late Fees

RUCO has removed APS late fees of \$824 which has been split evenly (i.e. \$412) between the water and wastewater divisions. RUCO Final Schedules JMM-17 for both the water and wastewater divisions. The Commission has consistently denied the inclusion of late fees in rate proceedings.

Accounting Services

As was discussed in Intervener Nielsen's Surrebuttal Testimony on page 11, line 1, the Company's bookkeeper, Ms. Perry's time is a shared expense with various other entities, and that the Company could not provide a contract(s) for her services. RUCO believes, based on the evidence that the Company's principals are using the Company's office primarily to sell lots, and not for water and wastewater service. The Company has the burden to separate its bookkeeping expenses. RUCO reduced these accounting fees as they related to one individual providing services to multiple companies out of the same office.

RUCO has removed \$16,250 from accounting services which has been split evenly (i.e. \$8,125) between the water and wastewater division. RUCO Final Schedules JMM-17 for both the water and wastewater divisions.

Miscellaneous Expenses

RUCO agrees with Mr. Nielsen that Staples office supplies should be reduced, as the Company is running multiple businesses out of the same office³. The Company did not properly segregate costs for its many business, and has the burden to do so. RUCO has removed \$596

³ See Surrebuttal Testimony of Mr. Nielsen at page 13,

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from miscellaneous expense which has been split evenly (i.e. \$298) between the water and wastewater division. RUCO Final Schedule JMM-17 for both the water and wastewater divisions.

RUCO has removed \$3,843 from miscellaneous expenses related to a copy machine which has been split evenly (i.e. \$1,922) between the water and wastewater divisions, as the Company did not properly segregate costs for its many business, and has the burden again to do so. RUCO Final Schedule JMM-17 for both the water and wastewater divisions.

RUCO has made additional disallowances for auto expenses in the amount of \$1,415 split evenly (i.e. \$708) between the water and wastewater divisions. RUCO Final Schedule JMM-17 for both the water and wastewater divisions. As the Company again did not segregate its costs, RUCO views this additional disallowance as reasonable. See Surrebuttal Testimony of Mr. Nielsen, page 13, line 10.

Similarly, RUCO has made additional disallowances for telephone expenses in the amount of \$3,071 split evenly (i.e. \$1,536) between the water and wastewater divisions.

As Mr. McCleve stated "I have -- I'm the primary holder of a cell phone. Mary Ann is the primary holder of a cell phone. In addition to those, we put secondary users on both of those lines. One of them is my daughter; one of them is my wife. And as I've -- as my counsel has told me very pointedly, that's probably not the smartest way of doing that." Transcript page 75, line 13.

As the Company again did not segregate its costs, RUCO view's this additional disallowance as reasonable. RUCO Final Schedule JMM-17 for both the water and wastewater divisions.

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Finally, RUCO further transferred \$1,447 in expenses from the wastewater division to water division to avoid having a negative balance in the miscellaneous expense account for both the water and wastewater divisions. RUCO Final Schedule JMM-17

Water and Wastewater Testing Expense

RUCO adjusted the water testing expenses for the reason cited in Staff witness, Michael Thompson's engineering report - the Company agrees. RUCO-4 at 5. RUCO recommends decreasing water testing expense by \$7,733 from \$8,107 to \$374. Id., RUCO surrebuttal schedule JMM-10. The \$1,096 of map expense is already included in a separate line item in general ledger account 675.5 Process/Bonds/Permits. The \$374 plus the \$1,096 equals the \$1,470 recommended in Staff's engineering report for the water division. Id. at 6.

Rate Case Expense

RUCO is requesting the Commission authorize a rate case expense surcharge. Id. at 7. It makes sense – why should the Company continue to collect rate case expense beyond what it is authorized? This is a fairness issue. In the alternative, RUCO has no objection to amortizing the expense for a longer period if there is a rate case filing requirement. A rate case filing requirement would alleviate RUCO's concern of the Company potentially over-earning. Again, all RUCO is concerned with is that the Company only collect what it is authorized, no more no less.

That amount, in RUCO's opinion should be \$50,000 for each of its divisions – no more. Id. at 17. In the Company's last rate case, Decision No. 70140 (dated January 23, 2008), the Commission awarded the Company rate case expense of \$100,000 total or \$50,000 per division to be amortized over 4 years. Id. The Company is now over-collecting its previously approved rate case expense. Id. That is not fair to its ratepayers.

The Commission continues to transition away from traditional ratemaking in an effort to ameliorate regulatory lag in the utilities favor, including surcharges and adjustor mechanisms - it should not be a one-way street. Id. There is no justifiable reason why the Company should earn more than it is authorized on rate case expense, especially in an environment where the Commission previously approved many adjustor mechanisms that only benefit the Companies.

RUCO's recommendation here is consistent with the Commission's Decision in the recent Pima Utility case - Decision No. 73573.⁴ There, the Commission approved the same rate case expense surcharge. Id. at 17. RUCO recommends that the Commission implement a rate case surcharge of \$4.27⁵ per customer for the water division and a rate case surcharge of \$4.25 for the wastewater division with the surcharge remaining in place for either (1) a period of 36 months, or (2) until the Company has collected \$50,000 in rate case expense recovery from both Divisions, whichever occurs first. Id. at 18.

Property Tax Expense

In calculating property tax expense for ratemaking purposes, the Commission uses a modified Arizona Department of Revenue ("ADOR") methodology for water and wastewater utilities. RUCO-3 at 9. RUCO calculated property tax expense using the modified ADOR method for both test year and RUCO-recommended revenues. Id. Since the modified ADOR method is revenue dependent, the property tax is different for test year and recommended revenues. RUCO has included a factor for property taxes in the gross revenue conversion factor that adjusts the revenue requirement for changes in revenue in the same way that income taxes are adjusted for changes in operating income. Id.

⁴ Pima Utility Company, Docket No. W-02199A-11-0329 ET AL.

⁵ Water Division - \$50,000 rate case expense / 325 customers / 36 months. Wastewater Division - \$50,000 rate case expense / 327 customers / 36 months.

1 2 Bill 2001. Id. at 10. The Company, in its filing, used a 20.00 percent assessment ratio, but 3 pursuant to the House Bill RUCO used an 18.125 percent assessment ratio. 4 assessment ratio is based on known and measureable rates from House Bill 2001, and the 5 methodology that was approved in Decision No. 74568 (dated June 20, 2014). Id. at 10

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Income Tax Expense

RUCO's income tax expense adjustment removes the Company's pro forma adjustment and increases income taxes by \$2,064 for the water division and \$13,545 for the wastewater division to zero out the negative income taxes in the adjusted test year. Id. at 11. RUCO removed income taxes because the Company is classified as a limited liability company and, therefore, does not report income taxes at the corporate level, but passes this income through to its shareholders. Id. RUCO continues to believe that the Commission's tax policy is not in the best interest of ratepayers.

RUCO also made an adjustment to the property tax assessment ratio pursuant to House

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4) **RATE DESIGN**

Water Division

RUCO in its final schedule recommends a monthly minimum charge for a 3/4-inch residential customer of \$23.00. No gallons are included in the monthly minimum charge. RUCO recommends a residential water commodity rate for the 3/4-inch residential customer of \$6.35 per thousand gallons for 1 to 4,000 gallons, \$9.52 per thousand gallons for 4,001 to 9,000 gallons, and \$11.43 per thousand gallons for any consumption over 9,000 gallons. RUCO Final Schedule JMM-18 for the water division.

There are several issues that the Company and Staff raise with regard to RUCO's proposed rate designs. The Company claims that RUCO's proposed water rate design will not allow it to recover its authorized return if too much of the customer's rate is recovered through the commodity rate and not enough is recovered through the monthly minimum rate. RUCO-4 at 11. The Company witness, Mr. Bourassa, states that RUCO's rate design only recovers about 35 percent in the monthly minimum.⁶ ld.

RUCO agrees that when one combines the 3/4 inch residential customer, the 3/4 inch commercial customer, 2 inch commercial customer, 2 inch irrigation, and standpipe/bulk water customer(s) the rate design only recovers 35 percent in the monthly minimum. Id. at 12; however, the monthly minimum recovered from the 3/4 inch residential customer is approximately 43.62 percent. The 3/4 inch residential customer represents over 75 percent of the Company's revenue. Id.

RUCO does not see revenue stability as an issue in this case. The difference in the monthly minimum is negligible - less than 5 percent.⁷ Id. Moreover, under RUCO's rate design customers have a greater opportunity to conserve. RUCO's rate design also sends the right price signal-that water is a scarce and precious commodity, and customers who conserve are rewarded through a lower price and those that do not are charged more. Id.

Under RUCO's final recommended rates, a residential 3/4-inch metered customer with an average usage of 4,123 gallons per month will pay \$49.57, which is \$10.99 more than the current \$38.58 or a 28.49 percent increase. RUCO Final Schedule JMM-19 for the water division.

By comparison, a residential wastewater customer with an average usage of 4,123 gallons per month under the Company's proposed rates would be billed \$71.27, which is

⁶ See Rebuttal Testimony of Mr. Bourassa, page 19 line 20.

⁷ This holds true for the 3/4 inch residential customer, the Company proposes approximately 47.68 percent be recovered in the monthly minimum.

Wastewater Division

RUCO in its final schedules recommends a commodity rate of \$10.8642⁸ per 1,000 gallons for the residential wastewater customer. RUCO Final Schedule JMM-18 for the wastewater division. RUCO's proposal differs from Staff's recommended rate design in that Staff is recommending a flat rate for the residential wastewater customer of \$65 with no commodity. RUCO-4 at 14. If ratepayers go out of town for a month, they are penalized by Staff and have to pay \$65.00, even though the customer has no usage, this is not so under RUCO's rate design. Id. Currently, rates are based on 1,000 gallon usage, with no monthly minimum. Id. at 14. Even the Company gives the customer some ability to control their wastewater bill, albeit a small one, with approximately 70 percent of the revenue recovered in the monthly minimum and 30 percent in the commodity rate for the residential wastewater customer. Id.

Staff's wastewater design does not provide the wastewater customer an opportunity to conserve. Under Staff's more aggressive rate design if the customer uses more than 12,000 gallons he/she would get a refund – which is actually counter to the message of conservation.

Id. In addition, Staff's rate design assigns the same commodity rate to all commercial and industrial customers. In other words, there is no difference between laundromat and restaurant customers, and no difference between the amounts of wear and tear each customer puts on the system. Id.

8 Rounded

Even though RUCO does not agree with the Company's wastewater rate design, RUCO feels it is better than the rate design recommended by Staff.

Further, RUCO presented evidence that volumetric pricing for sanitary sewer service:

- Helps to preserve wastewater treatment capacity, and thereby postpone or eliminate the need for costly additional treatment plants.
- Reduces operating costs.
- Reduces sewer overflows, which endanger public health and the environment.

Facts which Staff cannot dispute. Exhibit RUCO-7

Under RUCO's final recommended rates, a residential wastewater customer with an average usage of 4,123 gallons per month will pay \$44.78, which is \$20.71 more than the current \$24.08 or an 86.00 percent increase. RUCO Final Schedule JMM-19 for the wastewater division. By comparison, a residential 3/4-inch metered customer with an average usage of 4,123 gallons per month under the Company's proposed rates would be billed \$72.7, which is \$48.39 more than the current \$24.08 or an increase of 200.98 percent. Company Final Schedule H-2 for the wastewater division.

5) COST OF CAPITAL

RUCO continues to recommend its cost of capital number which is 9.25 percent, which is comparable to Staff's cost of capital number of 9.20 percent if you remove the 60 basis point policy adjustment coming from the Director's Office. Transcript 621 – 625. RUCO does not support an additional 60 point premium, based on a blanket policy decision from the Director's Office. There is no mathematical analysis or computation to support the 60 basis points, and thus it should be rejected.

Although, the Company's upward adjustments for both business and financial risk are derived from actual financial data, they too rely heavily on future projections and are purely speculative. Given, the Company's puffery of its numbers and inherent flaws in Staff's policy adjustment, RUCO's recommendation is the only reasonable one offered.

6) OTHER ISSUES – STANDPIPE

RUCO recommends that the Company file a yearly report by September 30th of each year which shows the revenue generated by month from the Company's standpipe. Id. at 16. Further, RUCO recommends that if the Company is over-earning it be addressed, trued-up, and any excess be refunded to ratepayers in the Company's next rate case. Id.

If Staff believes the Company is over-earning, they can ask the Commission to order the Company to file a rate case. Id. Staff's recommendation that the Company be required to file a rate case in three years rather than five years as proposed by the Company in order to report activity of the proposed standpipe is misplaced. Increasing the rate case expense to be recovered over three years instead of five, provides no guarantee the Company will file at the end of the three year period. Id. at 16. Likewise, there simply is no guarantee that the Company will generate any significant revenues from the standpipe. Finally, when the Company files a new rate case in three years rather than five years, customers may have to endure another rate increase sooner than later. Staff's standpipe recommendation should be rejected.

RUCO complied with the Judge's request to address the following in the hearing:

Whether it would be in the public interest to include the costs of the standpipe and related facilities in rate base and create a surcredit

mechanism to return the income received from standpipe sales back to ratepayers on a monthly basis.

The surcredit would be calculated as follows: the income from standpipe sales month, divided by the gallons (in thousands) of non-standpipe water sold in the month, would equal the credit per 1,000 gallons for the month. The surcredit rate would then be applied to the gallons billed (in thousands) to each customer. **[EXAMPLE:** Assume the Company receives \$1,000 in income from standpipe sales and sells 2,000,000 gallons of non-standpipe water during the month. Under that scenario, each customer would receive a \$0.50 credit per 1,000 gallons used during that month.]

In response, RUCO analyzed the results and recommends against this suggestion by the Judge at this time due to the fact that deep well number 4 would be needed, which would ultimately cost the ratepayer more, as explained below. Transcript page 438 through 440. Staff, on the other hand, provided its own alternative to the Judge's suggestion. Staff Memorandum Reply to a Procedural Order. Staff's engineer concluded that deep well number 4 would be needed as a peaker in the summer months when extra demand would be put on the system. Ibid. Staff, however, offered no alternatives, such as using the shallow wells to generate the additional capacity. If well number 4 is included, RUCO agrees with the Company that this would not benefit the ratepayer.

In RUCO's opinion, Staff's alternative to the administrative law judge's request is too cumbersome, involves too many assumptions and resembles a mini SIB. However, the Commission could exclude the three summer months in which deep well number 4 would be used, and only include 75 percent of the standpipe and related costs of the standpipe in rate

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base. This way only 75 percent of the revenue would be included. Transcript 705 – 707. RUCO would not opposed this alternative. Further, if demand is an issue the Commission could order the Company not to run its standpipe in the summer months, as part of its curtailment plan.

7) OTHER ISSUES - COMMINGLING OF FUNDS

In order to eliminate commingling issues going forward, at a minimum RUCO believes that the Company should:

- 1) Have a separate dedicated phone line for utility source business.
- 2) Maintain a vehicle mileage log for vehicles used to travel from Queen Creek to utility source.
- 3) Have a separate supply account for office items bought and used by utility source.
- 4) For any shared equipment, such as copiers, provide usage sheets for each of the multiple companies.
- 5) Have contracts and maintain weekly timesheets for all utility source employees.
- 6) List the business hours and have a sign on the guard house that the guard house is used only to conduct utility source business.

(Transcript 705 – 707),

Further, RUCO recommends that the Company file as a compliance item to this docket within 30 days of a Decision confirmation of compliance with the above requirements.

8) <u>COMPLIANCE ISSUES</u>

RUCO recommends that the Company come into compliance with the two issues raised at the hearing within 90 days of a decision in this matter:

- 1 a. Transfer of all Utility Plant into Utility Source, LLC's name. 2 b. File an application for an extension of its Certificate of Convenience and 3 Necessity ("CC&N") territory to cover customers that the Company is currently 4 serving outside of its CC&N area. 5 6 9) **CONCLUSION** For all of the above reasons, the Commission should adopt RUCO's recommendations. 7 8 9 RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED this 24th day of March, 2015. 10 11 12 13 14 AN ORIGINAL AND THIRTEEN COPIES of the foregoing filed this 24th day of March, 2015 with: 15 **Docket Control** 16 **Arizona Corporation Commission** 1200 West Washington 17 Phoenix, Arizona 85007 18 COPIES of the foregoing hand delivered/ mailed this 24th day of March, 2015 to: 19
- Sarah Harpring 20 Administrative Law Judge **Hearing Division** 21 Arizona Corporation Commission 1200 West Washington 22 Phoenix, Arizona 85007

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